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ABSTRACT

A survey examined students' attitudes about communication with their parents and others on sex-related topics, with particular emphasis given to the barriers to parent-teenager communication identified by the teenagers themselves and to suggestions for improving openness in communication. Subjects, 105 male and 142 female students aged 14 to 19 enrolled in 11 sex education classes in 2 Kentucky high schools, completed confidential questionnaires on the same day to minimize discussion of the survey among students. Results indicated that: (1) 71% of the teenagers communicated freely with their parents about most topics, but only 52% said they communicated freely with their parents about sex or sex-related topics; (2) 30% said they could not talk comfortably with their mothers about sex while 47% said they could not talk with their fathers; (3) 58% of females reported close communication with their fathers about sex as compared to 33% of males; (4) teenagers cited 13 main reasons why they could not talk with their parents about sex, with "embarrassment" cited by 29% of the subjects; and (5) teenagers rated friends as their primary face-to-face source of sexual information, followed by teachers, parents, older siblings, other relatives, a doctor or nurse, and ministers. Findings underscore the need for parents (particularly fathers) to learn to communicate supportively and with empathy if not with agreement. (Seven tables of data are included.) (RS)

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PATTERNS AND COMMUNICATION BARRIERS BETWEEN TEENAGERS AND PARENTS ABOUT SEX-RELATED TOPICS: A SURVEY OF TEENAGERS IN SEX EDUCATION CLASSES

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ABSTRACT

COMMUNICATION PATTERNS AND BARRIERS
BETWEEN TEENAGERS AND PARENTS
ABOUT SEX-RELATED TOPICS:
A SURVEY OF TEENAGERS IN SEX EDUCATION CLASSES

Public concern about teenage pregnancy and the threat of sexually transmitted deseases like AIDS make sex education information vital for today's teenagers. This study utilized a survey of 249 teenagers in sex education classes to study patterns of communication about sex-related topics between teenagers and parents and other sources of sex information. Particular emphasis was given to barriers to parent-teenager communication identified by the teenagers themselves and to suggestions for improving openness in communication.

The majority of teenagers (71%) said they could communicate freely with their parents about most topics, but only half (52%) said they could communicate freely with their parents about sex or sex-related topics. Thirty percent of the teenagers said they could not talk comfortably with their mothers about sex as compared to 47% who said they could not talk with their fathers. Results showed that 58% of the females reported closed communication with their fathers about sex-related topics as compared to only 33% of teenaged males.

Teenagers cited 13 main reasons why they could not talk with their parents about sex or sex-related topics: embarrassment (29%), poor communication in general (11%), different values about sex and dating (11%), avoidance of conflict (10%), teenager chooses not to discuss it with parents (10%), it's a topic simply not discussed (9%), parents might accuse them of being sexually active (7%), parents think they are too young (5%), they are too busy to talk about it (5%), parents don't want to discuss it (4%), parents are overprotective (4%), teenager is not close to parents (3%), and parents wouldn't understand (2%).

Teenagers in the survey described their most frequently consulted sources of sex information and the characteristics of those sources which made them feel comfortable in communicating about sex. These characteristics closely resembled the items which they said would make it easier to talk to their parents about sex-related topics.

The findings in this study underscore the need for parents to learn to communicate supportively and with empathy if not with agreement. The need is particularly acute for fathers to develop better interpersonal communication skills.

COMMUNICATION PATTERNS AND BARRIERS BETWEEN TEENAGERS AND PARENTS ABOUT SEX-RELATED TOPICS: A SURVEY OF TEENAGERS IN SEX EDUCATION CLASSES

The Planned Parenthood Federation of America reports that over one million American teenage girls get pregnant each year and that 80% of those pregnancies are unintentional (Wattleton, 1988). A poll conducted by Lou Harris and Associates reported that more than half of American teenagers are sexually active by age 17, but that only about a third of them use contraceptives (Harris, 1986). Concern about teenage pregnancy and the threat of sexually transmitted diseases such as Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome which threaten public health have prompted many public education systems to mandate sex education courses for teenagers. In 1989, the state of Kentucky mandated a family life skills curriculum for elementary, middle, and high school students. Such action fuels public controversy about the role and responsibility of parents to provide sex education for their children.

Planned Parenthood officials say the results of the Harris poll indicate the need for significant improvement in parent-child communication (Wattleton, 1988). Other researchers agree that communication between parent and child about values is one of the prime factors of child socialization, and that family sex education can be important in delaying adolescent sexual activity (Moore & Peterson, 1986). In their research into parental attitudes and the occurence of adolescent sexual activity, Kristin Moore and James Peterson concluded that good communication relationships between parents with tradi-

tional family values and their daughters result in lower incidence of adolescent sexual activity (Moore & Peterson, 1986).

In a study of parent-child communication about sex and young adolescents' sexual knowledge and attitudes, Terri Fisher concluded that sex education communication in the family is an important source for the transmission of values and attitudes. Fisher found that mothers are generally the parents who talk with both sons and daughters, but that mothers tend to have more communication with daughters. Fathers report less communication with children about sexuality than mothers (Fisher, 1988). In another study, Fisher concluded that the quality of family communication in general was not related to parent-child communication about sex (Fisher, 1987).

A Lou Harris and Associates survey of 1,000 teenagers on a variety of topics concerning sexuality emphasizes the need to improve parent-child communication and sex (Harris, 1986). The researchers found that 31 percent of the teenagers had never talked to their parents about sex or birth control. Nearly half (42%) said they would be too nervous or afraid to bring up the subject with their parents. The study found that girls were more likely to have talked with their parents than boys. Despite the fact that many had not talked with their parents about sex, 29 percent listed parents as their prime source of information about contraception and birth control.

The second most frequently cited source was courses or teachers at school (19%) followed next by friends (14%). Television, books and magazines were the prime source of information for 14 percent of teenagers. Other sources included a doctor or nurse (5%), brothers or sisters (4%), family planning clinics (4%), other relatives (2%), and sexual partners (2%).

Other research focuses on the sources of sex education information. Gregory Sanders and Ronald Mullis asked female college students to identify

their various sources of sex information (Sanders & Mullis, 1988). Friends were the most frequently cited source by 85 percent of the students, followed by books (80%), school (79%), parents (46%), siblings (22%), and church (11%). The majority of students in the survey reported they had discussed sexual topics with their parents, but 43 percent said their parents had avoided the topic.

Hazel Rozema studied defensive communication climate as a barrier to parent-child communication about sexuality (Rozema, 1986). She concluded that adolescents may prefer to discuss sex-related topics with same sex peers rather than parents or others based on the communication climate. Same sex peers tend to generate support, while opposite sex peers may create embarrassment or criticism and parents may generate defensiveness. Rozema found that college students obtained more of their information about sexuality from mothers than fathers and more from peers than parents.

On the general topic of communication with parents, Dennis Papini studied early adolescent age and gender differences in patterns of emotional self-disclosure to parents and friends (Papini, 1989). Papini found that among 12 to 15 year old students, females tended to have greater emotional self-disclosure to parents and peers than did males, and that older adolescents exhibited greater self-disclosure to friends than younger adolescents. Emotional self-disclosure to parents was most closely associated with the adolescent's perception of open, satisfying, and close family relationships.

These research findings and public concern about teenage sexual activity and its attendant medical and social consequences underscore the need for understanding the patterns of communication employed by teenagers in discussing sex and sex-related topics. More particularly it is important to learn the nature of barriers which teenagers say prevent communication with their parents about these topics.

Methodology

The general design of this research project was a survey of teenagers in sex education classes. A confidential questionnaire was developed to measure students' attitudes about communication with their parents on general topics, communication with their parents and others on sex-related topics, and the reasons that teenagers say they can or cannot discuss sex with their parents.

Because of the sensitivity of the subject matter, an availability sampling method was used to survey students in high school sex education classes where permission to do so could be obtained. Four sex education teachers at Ohio County High School in Hartford, Kentucky, and Henderson County High School in Henderson, Kentucky, were invited to participate in the study. All four teachers agreed. They were asked to administer the questionnaire to all students on the same day to minimize discussion of the survey among students in order to prevent any bias in those who had not yet completed the questionnaire. In reading the instructions ahead to the class they stressed the confidentiality of the survey. Questionnaires were administered to students in eleven sex education classes.

The questionnaires were completed by 249 students aged 14 to 19. There were 105 males and 142 females. The majority (84%) were aged 15 to 17. Most were white (93%), and the remainder (7%) were black. Most of the teenagers lived with both parents (62%), but nearly a third (28%) lived with their mothers only, and the rest of the students lived with their fathers only, with their grandparents, or with other relatives or guardians. Most of the students (61%) said they had older brothers or sisters.

The majority of the students (64%) reported their fathers had a high school diploma, GED, or less, while the rest said their fathers had attended

college or received college or graduate degrees. The majority (62%) reported their mothers had a high school diploma, GED, or less, while the rest said their mothers had some college or had received college or graduate degrees.

Nearly half of the students (48%) reported they lived on farms, rural areas, or in towns of less than 5,000 people; however, almost as many (46%) reported they lived of cities larger than 20,000 persons. The rest said they lived in towns of between 5,000 and 20,000 people.

Results

Openness In Communicating With Parents about General Topics

Responses to the first three questions on the survey instrument indicate that most of the students feel they have good communication relationships with their parents, but some indicated they are not able to communicate well with their fathers. The majority (71%) said they agreed with question #1: "About most topics in general, I can communicate freely with my parents." Most (62%) agreed with question #2: "My mom and I can talk about anything." Results for question #3 were more widely distributed. The statement read: "My dad and I can talk about anything." Only 40 percent of the students agreed with the statement, while 37 percent disagreed with it and the rest were uncertain. A gender crosstabulation on question #3 revealed that over half the males (53%) agreed with the statement while less than a third of the females (30%) agreed with the statement.

Analysis of variance to compare differences in mean scores on these three general openness items according to the father's education, mother's education, the age of the teenager, person with whom the teenager lives, and their rural or urban environment showed significant differences on some items. On question

#1: "About most topics in general, I can communicate freely with my parents.", an ANOVA for father's education indicated a strong trend toward significance ($p = .052$). The most open relationships occurred among teenagers whose fathers have attended or graduated from college. There was no significant effect for mother's education or person with whom the teenager lives, but there was a significant two-way interaction between father's education and person with whom the teenager lives ($p = .045$). Interestingly, the greatest openness was among teenagers whose fathers had some college education and who lived with both parents. The second lowest openness was among teenagers whose fathers had attended some college but who lived with their fathers only.

On question #2: "My mom and I can talk about anything.", an ANOVA showed a significant two-way interaction when comparing the variables of father's education and person with whom the student lives ($p = .009$). The most open communication with mothers was reported by teenagers who lived with their fathers and whose fathers had attended college, but did not graduate. No significant differences were found for any of the other demographic variables on this particular item.

On question #3: "My dad and I can talk about anything.", an analysis of variance showed that teenagers living with only their father were significantly more open that those living with both parents or only their mother ($p = .034$). Another ANOVA on the age of the teenagers indicated significantly more openness ($p = .024$) in communication with fathers about general topics from teenagers who were 17 or 18 years old and less openness reported by the younger teenagers. ANOVA also revealed a significant two-way interaction between the mother's education and father's education ($p = .014$). The most open communication with fathers was by teenagers whose fathers and mothers have both attended college or are college graduates.

TABLE 1

DIFFERENCES IN OPENNESS ON GENERAL COMMUNICATION WITH PARENTS ACCORDING TO FATHER'S EDUCATION AND PERSON WITH WHOM TEENAGER LIVES (ANOVA)

Two-way interaction of father's education and person with whom teenager lives p=.045

	Both parents	Mother	Father
Not grad.	2.24	2.56	•
Diploma	2.54	2.50	2.09
College	1.85	2.13	2.50
College grad.	2.19	2.13	2.00

' Lower means indicate greater openness. Range=1-5.

•Only one case

TABLE 2

DIFFERENCES IN OPENNESS OF GENERAL COMMUNICATION WITH MOTHER ACCORDING TO FATHER'S EDUCATION AND PERSON WITH WHOM TEENAGER LIVES (ANOVA)

Two-way interaction of father's education and person with whom teenager lives p=.009

	Both Parents	Mother	Father
Not grad.	2.32	2.94	•
Diploma	2.42	2.25	2.18
College	2.23	1.67	1.50
College grad.	2.41	2.73	1.67

' Lower means indicate greater openness. Range=1-5.

•Only one case

TABLE 3

DIFFERENCES IN OPENNESS OF GENERAL COMMUNICATION WITH FATHER ACCORDING TO FATHER'S EDUCATION, MOTHER'S EDUCATION, AND PERSON WITH WHOM TEENAGER LIVES (ANOVA)

Two-way interaction of father's education and mother's education p=.014

	Mother's Education			
	Not grad.	Diploma	College	College Grad.
Father's Education				
Not grad.	2.90	3.56	4.50	3.17
Diploma	3.69	3.02	3.13	3.11
College	3.67	2.13	2.33	3.00
College grad.	•	3.14	2.20	2.78

[1] Lower means indicate greater openness. Range=1-5.

• Only one case

TABLE 4

DIFFERENCES IN OPENNESS OF GENERAL COMMUNICATION WITH FATHER ACCORDING TO AGE OF TEENAGERS (ANOVA)

VARIABLE	VALUE	MEAN[1]	CASES	SIGNIFICANCE
age				p=.024
	15	3.15	61	
	16	3.37	68	
	17	2.75	72	
	18	2.77	13	

[1] Lower means indicate greater openness. Range=1-5.

T-tests to compare differences in means on these three general openness items according to gender, race, and the presence or absence of older siblings confirmed a significant difference between males and females in response to question #3: "My dad and I can talk about anything." Males were more likely to agree with this statement than females ($p = .001$), but race or having older siblings did not make a difference.

Openness In Communicating With Parents about Sex-Related Topics

Slightly more than half of all the teenagers (52%) agreed with question #4: "When the subject is sex or sex-related topics, my parents and I have an open communication channel." One fourth of the teenagers (25%) disagreed with the statement, and the rest were uncertain. Slightly more than half (52%) agreed with question #5: "My mom and I can talk comfortably about sex or sex-related topics." Nearly a third (30%) disagreed with that statement, and the rest were uncertain. Nearly half of all teenagers (47%) disagreed with question #6: "My dad and I can talk comfortably about sex or sex-related topics." Less than a third (29%) agreed with the statement, and the rest were uncertain. A gender crosstabulation on question #6 revealed that a third of the males (33%) disagreed with the statement, and more than half of the females (58%) disagreed with it.

ANOVA's and t-tests on these three sex communication openness items revealed significant differences in means for several demographic characteristics on two items. While no significant differences were found on question #4, analysis of question #5 and #6 did reveal significant differences. Older teenagers reported more openness in their communication with their mothers about sex-related topics ($p = .009$). Males were more open than females in talking with their fathers about sex-related topics ($p < .001$) Teenagers

who live with their father were more open in communicating with their father about sex-related topics ($p = .038$) as were teenagers whose parents had attended college ($p = .041$).

Indices of openness in communicating with parents on general topics and on sex-related topics were created by combining scores on questions 1-3 and 4-6 respectively. A T-test comparing means on these indices indicated that students are significantly less open in communicating with their parents about sex-related topics than about general topics ($p < .001$).

Reasons for Closed Communication With Parents About Sex-Related Topics

Question #7B asked teenagers to complete the following phrase: "My parents and I cannot talk about sex or sex-related topics because :..." Less than half of the teenagers (42%) indicated they were not able to talk with their parents about sex-related topics. Of those, the most frequently cited response was embarrassment (20%). Communication problems in general were frequently cited (11%), and just as many teenagers (11%) said they and their parents have different values about sex. Other teenagers (10%) said they hoped to avoid conflict, and as many others (10%) said they simply did not want to discuss sex-related topics with their parents.

Some teenagers (9%) said sex-related topics are simply not discussed in their family, and a few (4%) indicated their parents specifically did not want to discuss it. Some teenagers (7%) were afraid to discuss sex-related topics with their parents because their parents might think they are sexually active. A few (5%) said their parents think they are too young to talk about such things, and just as many (5%) said they or their parents are too busy to take time for such communication.

Relative Ease of Discussing 5 Categories
Of Sex-Related Topics With Parents

Question #9 asked teenagers to consider five sex-related topics and rank them in order from 1 to 5 with 1 being the easiest and 5 being the most difficult topic to discuss with their parents. The topics and their overall ranking are displayed in the following table.

TABLE 5

RELATIVE EASE OF DISCUSSING FIVE CATEGORIES OF SEX-RELATED TOPICS WITH PARENTS

TOPIC	RANK	MEAN[1]
Dating Behavior	1	1.82
Bodily Changes Associated With Sexual Maturity	2	2.63
Sexually Transmitted Diseases Like AIDS Or V.D.	3	2.75
Pregnancy And Birth Control	4	3.65
Sexual Activity	5	4.16

[1] Lower means indicate greater ease. Range=1-5.

T-tests comparing the means of teenagers' responses for each category of sex-related topics showed all were significantly different from each other ($p < .001$) with the exception of mean scores for "bodily changes associated with sexual maturity" and "sexually transmitted diseases."

T-tests and ANOVAs compared the differences in means of each individual topic according to gender, race, the presence or absence of older siblings, the mother's education leval, the father's education level, person with whom the teenager lives, and their rural/urban background. Three significant differences were found. Females had more difficulty talking with their parents about sexual activity than males ($p = .006$). Teenagers whose fathers had lower levels of education reported more difficulty talking with parents about sexually transmitted diseases than those teenagers whose fathers had higher education levels ($p = .012$). Teenagers who lived in towns of 5,000 to 20,000 in population reported more ease in discussing pregnancy and birth control than did teenagers in more rural areas or larger cities ($p = .035$).

Factors Which Influence Reluctance to Communicate With Parents On Sex-Related Topics

Through focus groups and pilot tests sixteen statements containing factors which may influence teenagers' willingness or reluctance to discuss sex or sex-related topics with parents were developed. Students in the survey were asked to indicate whether or not each statement applied to them. The majority of the students disagreed with most of the statements, thus indicating relative openness in their communication relationships with their parents. Most of the students (66%) said they would not be too embarrassed to discuss sex or sex-related topics with their parents. Even more (71%) said their parents would not be too embarrassed to talk with them. Most (69%) did not think their parents would get upset or angry with them, but just over half (57%) were confident their parents would not accuse them of being sexually active if they tried to talk about it, and the rest (43%) thought their parents would accuse them. The students were evenly divided

TABLE 6

FACTORS IN TEENAGERS' RELUCTANCE TO COMMUNICATE WITH PARENTS ON SEX-RELATED TOPICS

FACTOR	CASES	%NO	%YES
I know enough already.	245	80	20
My parents say I'm too young.	248	77	23
My parents lack information.	246	74	26
My parents avoid the issue.	246	74	26
We have poor communication.	246	73	27
My parents are too embarrassed.	247	71	29
I might make my parents upset.	249	69	31
I'm too embarrassed.	249	66	34
My parents are too old fashioned.	245	65	35
My parents won't understand.	247	64	36
I may disappoint my parents.	247	62	38
It's none of my parents' business.	247	61	39
It's too personal.	246	60	40
My parents may accuse me.	248	57	43
My parents may hassle me.	246	50	50
I prefer other sources.	245	43	57

(50%) on whether or not their parents would start "hassling" them about relationships with a boyfriend or girlfriend. The majority (61%) thought parents should discuss sex-related topics with them, but a sizeable number (39%) felt it is none of their parents' business.

Most of the teenagers (60%) said sex was not too personal to discuss with parents, and a large majority (80%) said that as teenagers they do not have all the information they need to know about sex. Most (74%) thought their parents would be receptive to the subject. The majority (77%) said their parents felt they were old enough to be discussing sex topics. While most teenagers (64%) said their parents would understand their needs, the rest (36%) said their parents wouldn't understand what they need to know. Nearly three-quarters of the teenagers (73%) indicated they communicate well with their parents. Most (65%) said their parents were not old fashioned when it comes to sex, but over a third (35%) said their parents were old fashioned and did not believe the same way they do.

Despite their general positive attitude toward communication about sex-related topics with their parents, most (57%) said they have other persons to discuss such things with, so they don't need to go to their parents. Almost two-thirds (62%) said they feared disappointing their parents if they started talking about sex or sex-related topics.

T-tests to compare differences in means on these reluctance-to-communicate questions according to gender and the presence or absence of siblings yielded some significant results. Females were more likely than males to think that their parents might get upset ($p = .013$) or that they might disappoint their parents ($p = .014$) by talking with them about sex. Males were more likely to think that they already know all they need to know about

sex (p = .009) and to say that they had sources other than parents to talk with (p = .014).

Differences were also noted for two questions when comparing means for teenagers with older siblings and those without older siblings. On question #27: "My parents don't think I'm old enough to be discussing such things", teenagers who have older brothers or sisters agreed with this statement more than teenagers without older siblings (p= .011). On question #21: "I have other persons I can discuss these things with, so I don't need to go to my parents", those teenagers with older siblings agreed more with the statement (p = .02).

Teenagers' Suggestions To Improve Communication About Sex-Related Topics

Teenagers were asked to complete the following phrase: "I would feel much more at ease discussing sex or sex-related topics with my parents if:...". While the response was varied many of the suggestions recommended by teenagers centered on improving their parents' interpersonal communication skills.

The largest category of responses (12%) was the teenagers' feeling that they needed to be better understood by their parents. Almost as many teenagers (8.7%) were afraid their parents would think they were sexually active if they brought up the subject. The same number of teenagers (8.7%) cited embarrassment, either to themselves or their parents, as a barrier.

TABLE 7

TEENAGERS' SUGGESTIONS TO IMPROVE COMMUNICATION

WITH PARENTS ABOUT SEX-RELATED TOPICS

SUGGESTION	CASES	PERCENTAGE
They would understand me.	25	12.0%
They wouldn't think I was having sex.	18	8.7
We wouldn't get embarrassed.	18	8.7
Miscellaneous.	15	7.2
They would listen more.	11	5.3
They were younger or nearer my age.	11	5.3
They weren't so restrictive or old fashioned.	11	5.3
They could realize what it's like to be a teenager.	11	5.3
They would be more open minded and less judgemental.	10	4.8
They wouldn't lecture.	8	3.8
We had better communication in general.	8	3.8
They had talked about it with me at a younger age.	7	3.4
They weren't my parents.	6	2.9
They wouldn't get upset.	6	2.9
They didn't think I was too young.	5	2.4
They wouldn't avoid the topic.	5	2.4
If I was older or married.	5	2.4
They were more like friends.	4	1.9
They trusted and respected me more.	4	1.9
They would let me make my own decisions.	4	1.9
They could keep a secret.	3	1.4
My parents began the conversation.	2	1.0
They had more time for me.	2	1.0
They could remember their own youth.	2	1.0
Total	208	100.0%

Discussion and Conclusions

Even though teenagers may report general openness in communication relationships with their parents, this study shows that when the subject is sex or sex-related topics , certain barriers exist which result in more closed communication. This study corroborates previous research that found mothers to be the parents who communicate more with their children, both sons and daughters, about sex. This pattern of fathers being less involved in communication with their children is not limited to sex-related topics. Regarding general topics teenagers express much more confidence in being able to talk openly with their mothers than with their fathers. This is true of male teenagers as well as female teenagers.

This does not mean that fathers have no impact on the communication climate in the home. The most consistent finding regarding openness in communicating about general topics was that the fathers' education level significantly affected the degree of openness felt by the teenagers. Interestingly, the greatest degree of openness was felt by the children of fathers who had attended college but had not graduated. Although the distribution of education levels attained by the mothers was very similar to the distribution for fathers, the education level of the mothers had no significant impact on communicative openness. It may be that the fathers' education level affects openness indirectly through affecting the socio-economic status of the families.

In spite of their claims of relative openness with parents, teenagers rated friends as their primary face-to-face source of sexual information. Teachers were next, followed by parents, older siblings, other relatives, a doctor or nurse, and ministers. These findings were consistent with Sanders & Mullis' survey of female college students who rated friends their primary source, then books, school, parents, siblings, and church.

Why are teenagers reluctant to discuss sex with their parents? In open-ended questioning, embarrassment, poor communication, and having different values about sex and dating were the most prominently mentioned answers. These answers are vague generic responses which may represent echoes of lessons taught in the sex education classes. Responses to sixteen closed-ended items were more revealing. The two most often cited reasons were fear of being "hassled" and fear of being accused by parents. These and other similar answers suggest two possibilities: Perhaps teenagers anticipate disagreement with parents over values and behaviors and simply prefer to avoid the unpleasantness. Avoidance may facilitate maintaining the values and behaviors by avoiding authoritative prohibitions. Or perhaps parents have demonstrated a lack of ability to listen, disagree, question, or instruct without generating defensiveness.

Teenagers listed many suggestions to improve communication with parents about sex-related topics. Those who already talk with their parents about sex said the main reasons were openness, understanding, closeness, and the fact that their parents want to be their primary source of sex information. Responses from those teenagers indicate a supportive communication climate and may point to parents who actively assume the role of sex educators.

In general, teenagers said their communication relationships with parents might be more comfortable if parents were more understanding, less embarrassed, would listen more, did not accuse or judge, and weren't so old fashioned. These factors may indicate the need for a less defensive communication climate.

The qualities of the preferred sources of sex information for the students included openness, understanding, closeness, and knowledge. With exception of knowledge, these four particular qualities were very similar to the suggestions students gave to improve their communication with parents.

Findings of this survey point to the need to improve parents' interpersonal communication skills to facilitate discussion of sex-related topics with teenagers. It is especially important to involve fathers in the communication process in their families since the results of this survey reveal them to be substantially less involved with their teenage sons and daughters than are the mothers. Fathers may need to learn a different style of communicating at home than the style used at their workplaces.

The categorized responses to open-ended questions may be used as a basis for development of a parent-teen sex education communication program. Sex and family life skills educators may find the survey results useful to develop curricula which might involve parents in parent-teen homework assignments. The survey instrument could be edited to include more specific sex education topics to yield more concrete data for classroom purposes.

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